

Review of *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* by Dean Spade (Verso Books)

by Paul Centorame | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* is an accessible guidebook meant to inspire local organizing efforts based in mutual care, generosity, and dependency. By reflecting on contemporary contexts in which people are increasingly individualized and rendered dependent on inadequate government support systems, *Mutual Aid* demonstrates that sharing and cohesion are radical steps toward liberation. On this basis, we are reminded that contemporary social crises can usher in the normalization of interdependent community engagement, inspiring lasting social movements built upon mutual aid.

KEYWORDS social movements, solidarity, crisis, mutual aid, pandemic

Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next). By Dean Spade. London: Verso Books, 2020, 128 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-8397-6212-3. CAD List: \$19.95.

Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next) offers current and prospective social movements an accessible guidebook to facilitate much-needed radical organizing tactics in contexts of crisis. *Mutual Aid* is primarily addressed to readers who are interested in developing, engaging with, or improving upon mutual aid organizations in their local communities. Spade's experience as an American lawyer, educator, trans activist, and well-known proponent of mutual aid approaches to social inequity figures centrally in the objectives of his book in a variety of ways. For instance, *Mutual Aid* carefully develops its proposed approach to material urgency such that government social services are not legitimated or held above the capabilities of community-based support systems. In this way, *Mutual Aid* is immediately delivered from a position which does not give credence to the often paternalistic, bureaucratic, and limited nature of expertise-based social assistance initiatives. The book demonstrates that these avenues of support are not only insufficient with respect to their capacity for providing people with what they need to survive, but are also exceedingly involved in creating and exacerbating the very crises which produce precarious living circumstances in the first place. This endeavor of critique is deeply connected to Spade's role as a major advocate for community interdependency movements designed to circumvent, exceed, and problematize welfare support systems.

Spade shows that as a result of the limited nature of current social assistance services, crises like COVID-19 have necessitated a plethora of social movements around the world organized through community interdependency as an essential survival mechanism. By reflecting on the successes of these crisis-driven movements, Spade demonstrates that similar kinds of social organizing can (and must be) be built up in order to achieve truly transformative social change. For instance, by reflecting on the strategies employed by Hong Kong's protest movement in the midst of COVID-19, Spade demonstrates ways in which models of mutual aid have already been successful in forcing government concessions and saving lives in crisis situations. Indeed, we are reminded that the successes of mutual aid can even be dated as far back as the 1780s, at which point Black communities had already begun to provide essential community-provided services for people whom government systems would not support (12). In reflecting on these successes of past and present mutual aid-based social movements, Spade inspires a sense of hope and solidarity for communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and other contemporary social crises. Above all, these sections of the book highlight important histories of transformative justice developed through the vital work of racialized women, feminists with disabilities, and other marginalized groups who have radically denounced the restrictive act of collaborating with police and other government agents to advance social progress.

Starting from the premise that periods of crisis and deteriorating neoliberal social assistance mechanisms produce a heightened necessity for collaborative, abolitionist social organizing, Spade develops his pitch for mutual aid in two main parts. Part I explores mutual aid historically and conceptually in order to distinguish it from social supports based in "charity" and other bureaucratized models of assistance, as well as to demonstrate its efficacy in the context of a social rupture. This is achieved through three main assertions in Chapter 1: First, that mutual aid projects directly problematize systemic inequities responsible for depriving people of their basic needs and offer alternative ways to meet those needs based on community support. Second, to the extent that mutual aid movements are chiefly mobilized against a shared reality of inequitable socioeconomic conditions, these movements are typically able to cultivate solidarity regardless of differences in lived experience. Third, mutual aid explicitly rejects the notion that "expertise" is a necessary prerequisite for improving social conditions; in fact, it is typically the presence of lawyers or social workers that will derail social progress in line with individualism, bureaucracy, and passivity. In Chapter 2, Spade demonstrates that features of mutual aid pose a fundamental threat to the status quo of normative social support mechanisms, which are largely facilitated by pathologizing, criminalizing, individualizing, and imposing sole responsibility on those who are most vulnerable. Following this, Chapter 3 emphasizes that periods of disaster are critical points at which government support systems are exposed as insufficient, which offers up a rupture through which existing systems can be replaced with something new. *Mutual Aid* thus inspires action on the grounds that now (more than ever) is the time for social movement toward liberation.

In Part II, Spade helps to guide readers in the direction of effectively organizing impactful mutual aid movements while alleviating common setbacks like burnout, overwork, and lack of motivation. Beginning with Chapter 4, Spade stresses the importance of careful discernment between common principles of "charity" models vis-a-vis those of mutual

aid. That is, it is imperative that members of a mutual aid organization distinguish and oppose practices such as dividing members into “deserving” and “undeserving” camps, taking on paternalistic roles, allowing co-option and corruption from government agents to go unchecked, or collaborating with the further breakdown of public infrastructure. In addition to providing readers with a comprehensive chart to avoid these pitfalls, Spade reassures us that it is not unnatural to be enticed in the direction of hierarchy, greed, and elitism; capitalism has subtly inculcated these values in us. However, mutual aid is meant to instill a new sense of social cohesion based upon flexibility, compassion, and justice—one where decision-making through *consensus* (not majority rule) is key.

In Chapter 5, Spade provides a rich collection of charts, schedules, and recommendations designed to assist mutual aid groups in relearning values of social organizing and forgoing values of hierarchy or bureaucracy. These materials include information on organizing effective consensus decision-making, fostering desirable leadership qualities, effectively handling money, alleviating burnout, and dealing with common kinds of group conflict. Being that hierarchy trains us to handle these dilemmas either through submissive avoidance or by imposing a dominating decisiveness over others, this section of *Mutual Aid* does the careful work of assisting readers to engage with conflict through compromise and empathy. Within mutual aid groups, Spade demonstrates that conflict can be reworked into something positive and generative rather than something to be avoided and left to fester. Even despite the toxic effects of contemporary social life on our understanding of conflict resolution, this chapter of *Mutual Aid* reminds readers that carefully executed social justice work can be rooted in joy, connection, mutual learning, and companionship.

In sum, *Mutual Aid* is not only a guidebook for surviving current and future social crises; it offers a means by which social life may be radically transformed toward widespread social equity, cohesion, dignity, and belonging. It is a comprehensive, accessible, and impactful text, which demonstrates that social movements based in interdependency are imperative and particularly conducive to radical social change in contemporary contexts.

Author Information



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I am a graduate research assistant and MA student in the Socio-Legal Studies program at York University. My academic interests include Foucaultian theory, LGBTQ+ rights, homonationalism, and governmentality. In my current research project, I examine how queer inclusion in Canadian law has discursively rearticulated same-sex relationships in terms of their potential for responsibility, productivity, and respectability. In conversation with other scholars who work at the intersection of governmentality and LGBTQ+ rights, I hypothesize that it is through a legal discourse of “love” that queer rights are constituted such that their very exercise ascertains commitments to care-giving, nation-building, and other elements of the prevailing neoliberal social order.

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